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ABSTRACT

This booklet, designed to provide educational materials on Arab history and culture, describes the contributions of Islamic civilization to western civilization. To be Arab, like American, was and is a cultural trait rather than a racial mark. To be Arab meant to be from the Arabic speaking world of common traditions, customs, and values shaped by a single and unifying language. The Arab civilization brought together Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It unified Arabians, Africans, Berbers, Egyptians, and many other peoples. The tensions of this mixing and meeting of peoples produced a vibrant and dynamic new civilization. The years between the seventh and thirteenth centuries mark a period in history when culture and learning flourished in the Islamic empire from Spain and North Africa, through Southern Europe, to India in the east. The Arab world enhanced and developed the arts and sciences and preserved the libraries of the early centuries of the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine cultures while Europe was in the depths of the Dark Ages. From this period of Arab influence, new words such as orange, sugar, coffee, sofa, satin, and algebra filtered into the languages of Europe. New discoveries were made in the sciences and arts that improved life and living conditions. Thousands of Arab contributions have become an integral part of human civilization. The development of the zero and algebra changed mathematics forever. Knowledge of contagion in the study of disease was a major breakthrough in medicine. The intense trade and resulting wealth of the period led to developments in architecture, navigation, and geography. (DK)

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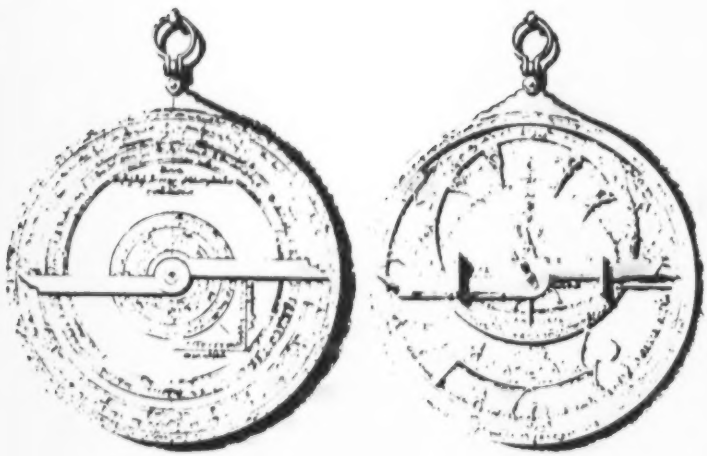
AQ Issues

Issue #6

ARAB CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION

by MARY MACRON



Front and back views of an ancient Arab astrolabe.

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ADC Issues is published by the ADC Research Institute and informs ADC members on issues of special significance. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) is a non-sectarian, non-partisan service organization committed to defending the rights and promoting the heritage of Arab-Americans. The largest grassroots organization of Arab-Americans, ADC was founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk in response to stereotyping, defamation and discrimination directed against Americans of Arab descent.

ADC serves its nationwide membership through direct advocacy in cases of defamation, through legal action in cases of discrimination, and through counseling in matters of immigration. The ADC Research Institute publishes information on issues of concern to Arab-Americans and provides educational materials on Arab history and culture as well as the ethnic experience of Arabs in the United States. It also sponsors summer internships in Washington for Arab-American college students. ADC's Middle East Women's and Children's Fund addresses the humanitarian needs of victims of violence in the Middle East.

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INTRODUCTION

Much like America today, the Arab world of the seventh to the thirteenth centuries was a great cosmopolitan civilization. It was an enormous unifying enterprise, one which joined the peoples of Spain and North Africa in the west with the peoples of the ancient lands of Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia in the east.

It was the rapid expansion of Islam that initially brought this empire together. Alliances were made, trade routes were opened, lands and peoples were welded into a new force. Islam provided the dynamism, but it was the Arabic language which provided the bond that held it together. Islam spread to lands more distant than North Africa and the fertile crescent, but it was in this area that a common Arab culture emerged.

To be Arab, then as now, was not to come from a particular race or lineage. To be Arab, like American, was (and is) a civilizational and a cultural trait rather than a racial mark. To be Arab meant to be from the Arabic speaking world—a world of common traditions, customs and values—shaped by a single and unifying language.

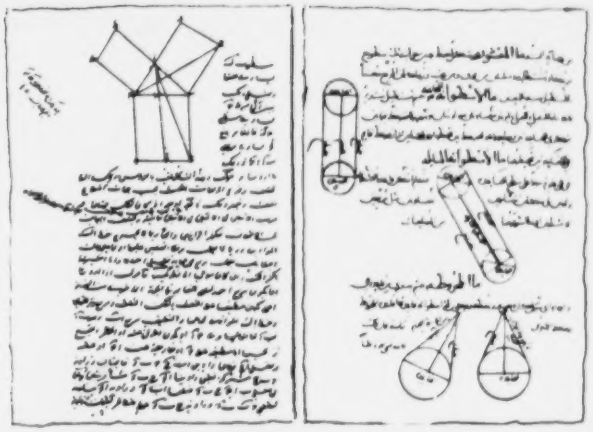
The Arab civilization brought together Muslims, Christians and Jews. It unified Arabians, Africans, Berbers, Egyptians, and the descendants of the Phoenicians, Canaanites, and many other peoples. This great "melting pot" was not without tensions, to be sure, but it was precisely the tension of this mixing and meeting of peoples that produced the vibrant and dynamic new civilization, the remarkable advances of which we outline in this *ADC Issues*.

* * *

Arab-Americans are proud of the role which our antecedents played in the development of human civilization. The contributions made by our people did not end with the decline of the Arab Empire in the thirteenth century; they continue to be made today. An account of the modern contributions of persons of Arabic-speaking descent—such as Danny Thomas, Ralph Nader, Helen Thomas, Dr. Michael Bakey and James Abourezk—will be the subject of a future *ADC Issues*.

ARAB CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION

The years between the seventh and thirteenth centures mark a period in history when culture and learning flourished in North Africa, Asia, southern Europe, and the Middle East. When one sets aside the vagaries of politics, intrigue, mistrust, and suspicion which have plagued Man's history, one finds that the Arab world continued to spin out the thread of earliest recorded civilization. It enhanced and developed the arts and sciences and preserved the libraries of the early centuries of the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine cultures. Indeed, during the Dark Ages of Europe, much learning was preserved for the world through the Arab libraries in the universities of Morocco (Fez), Nigeria (Timbuktu) and Egypt (al Azhar). From this period of Arab influence, new words such as orange, sugar, coffee, sofa, satin, and algebra filtered into the languages of Europe and eventually into our own. New discoveries were made in the sciences and arts which improved the life and condition of Man, and thousands of Arab contributions have become an integral part of human civilization.



Pages from al-Biruni's (973-1048) manuscript on the elements of astronomy (left), and Tabit ibn Qarra's translation of Euclid, 890 A.D.

MATHEMATICS

In mathematics, the Arab *sifr*, or zero, provided new solutions for complicated mathematical problems. The Arabic numeral—an improvement on the original Hindu concept—and the Arab decimal system facilitated the course of science. The Arabs invented and developed algebra and made great strides in trigonometry. Al Khwarizmi, credited with the founding of algebra, was inspired by the need to find a more accurate and comprehensive method of ensuring precise land divisions so that the Koran could be carefully obeyed in the laws of inheritance. The writings of Leonardo da Vinci, Leonardo Fibonacci of Pisa, and Master Jacob of Florence show the Arab influence on mathematical studies in European universities. The reformation of the calendar, with a margin of error of only one day in five thousand years, was also a contribution of Arab intellect.

ASTRONOMY

Like albegra, the astrolabe was improved with religion in mind. It was used to chart the precise time of sunrises and sunsets, and to determine the period for fasting during the month of Ramadan. Arab astronomers of the Middle Ages compiled astronomical charts and tables in observatories such as those at Palmyra and Maragha. Gradually, they were able to determine the length of a degree, to establish longitude and

latitude, and to investigate the relative speeds of sound and light. Al Biruni, considered one of the greatest scientists of all time, discussed the possibility of the earth's rotation on its own axis—a theory proven by Galileo six centuries later. Arab astronomers such as al Fezari, al Farghani, and al Zarqali added to the works of Ptolemy and the classic pioneers in the development of the magnetic compass and the charting of the zodiac. Distinguished astronomers from all over the world gathered to work at Maragha in the thirteenth century.

MEDICINE

Galenus, Avicenna and Hippocrates, the great physicians of antiquity, as they appeared in a 16th-century medical book.

In the field of medicine, the Arabs improved upon the healing arts of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Al razi, a medical encyclopedist of the ninth century, was an authority on contagion. Among his many volumes of medical surveys, perhaps the most famous is the *Kitab al Mansuri*. It was used in Europe until the sixteenth century. Al Razi was the first to diagnose smallpox and measles, to associate these diseases and others with human contamination and contagion, to introduce such remedies as mercurial ointment, and to use animal gut for sutures.

The famous scientist philosopher known in Europe as Avicenna was Ibn Sina, an Arab. He was the greatest writer of medicine in the Middle Ages, and his *Canon* was required reading throughout Europe until the seventeenth century. Avicenna did pioneer work in mental health, and was a forerunner of today's psychotherapists. He believed that some illnesses were psychosomatic, and he sometimes led patients back to a recollection of an incident buried in the subconscious in order to explain the present ailment.

In the fourteenth century, when the Great Plague ravaged the world, Ibn Khatib and Ibn Khatima of Granada recognized that it was spread by contagion. In his book, *Kitabu'l Maliki*, al Maglusi showed a rudimentary conception of the capillary system; an Arab from Syria, Ibn al-Nafis, discovered the fundamental principles of pulmonary circulation.

Camphor, cloves, myrrh, syrups, juleps, and rosewater were stocked in Arab *sydaliyahs* (pharmacies) centuries ago. Herbal medicine was widely used in the Middle East, and basil, oregano, thyme, fennel, anise, licorice, coriander, rosemary, nutmeg, and cinnamon found their way through Arab pharmacies to European tables.

ARCHITECTURE

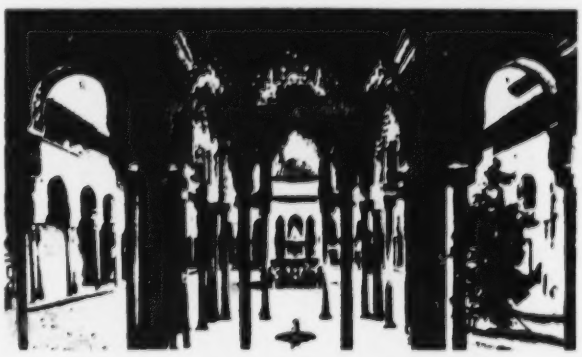
As with astronomy and mathematics, the great purpose of early Arab architecture was to glorify Islam. Architects devoted their skills primarily to the building of mosques and mausoleums. They borrowed the horseshoe arch from the Romans, developed it into their own unique style, and made it an example for the architecture of Europe. The Great Mosque of Damascus, built in the early eighth century, is a beautiful demonstration of the use of the horseshoe arch. The mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, with its pointed arches, was the inspiration behind the building of many magnificent cathedrals in Europe.

Arab cusp, trefoil, and ogee arches provided models for the Tudor arch such as those used in the cathedrals of Wells in England and Chartres in France. The Muslim minaret, itself inspired by the Greek lighthouse, became the campanile in Europe. One of the most famous examples of this can be seen in the San Marcos Square in Venice.

Designs from the Islamic mosques of Jerusalem, Mecca, Tripoli, Cairo, Damascus, and Constantinople were borrowed in the building of ribbed vaults in Europe. The Arab use of cubal transitional supports under domes was incorporated into the cathedrals and palaces of eleventh and twelfth century Palermo.

Arab styles were elegant and daring. Arabesque designs, calligraphy, and explosions of color can be seen today in such structures as the Lion Court of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, the Great Mosque of Cordoba, and many of the great medieval religious and civic buildings of Europe.

While we as Westerners are more familiar with the influence of Arab architecture on the Romance countries of Spain, Italy and France, we do not often remember that the Arab empires reached into Eastern Europe and Asia as well. Startling remnants of a once powerful conquest are particularly prevalent in Russia. The brilliant blue tiled dome of the mosque of Bibi Khanum, Timu's (Tamerlane) favorite wife, catches the visitor's eye in Samarkand. Here, as well as in the complex of tombs called Shah i Zinda (The Living Prince), much of the old beauty is being returned to its former elegance through restoration.



Court of the Lions, Alhambra, Granada.

NAVIGATION AND GEOGRAPHY

The world's earliest navigational and geographical charts were developed by Canaanites who, probably simultaneously with the Egyptians, discovered the Atlantic Ocean. The medieval Arabs improved upon ancient navigational practices

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with the development of the magnetic needle in the ninth century.

One of the most brilliant geographers of the medieval world was al-Idrisi, a twelfth century scientist living in Sicily. He was commissioned by the Norman King, Roger II, to compile a world atlas which contained seventy maps. Some of the areas were theretofore uncharted. Called *Kitabal Rujari* (Roger's Book), Idrisi's work was considered the best geographical guide of its time.

Ibn Battuta, an Arab, must have been the hardiest traveler of his time. He was not a professional geographer, but in his travels by horse, camel and sailboat, he covered over seventy-five thousand miles. His wanderings, over a period of decades at a time, took him to Turkey, Bulgaria, Russia, Persia, and central Asia. He spent several years in India, and from there was appointed ambassador to the Emperor of China. After China, he toured all of North Africa and many places in western Africa. Ibn Battuta's book, *Rihla* (Journey), is filled with information on the politics, social conditions, and economics of the places he visited.

A twenty-five year old Arab, captured by Italian pirates in 1520, has received much attention in the West. He was Hassan al Wazzan, who became a protege of Pope Leo X. Leo persuaded the young man to become a Christian, gave him his own name, and later convinced him to write an account of his travels on the then almost unknown African continent. Hassan became Leo Africanus and his book was translated into several European languages. For nearly two hundred years, Leo Africanus was read as the most authoritative source on Africa.

It should also be remembered that in the fifteenth century Vasco da Gama, exploring the east coast of Africa near Malindi, was guided by an Arab pilot who used maps never before seen by Europeans. The pilot's name was Ahmed ibn Majid.

HORTICULTURE

The ancient Arabs loved the land, for in earth and water they saw the source of life and the greatest of God's gifts. They were guided by the words attributed to the Prophet: "Whoever bringeth the dead land to life . . . for him is reward therein." They were pioneers in botany. In the twelfth century an outstanding reference work, *Al Filahat* by Ibn al Awam, described more than five hundred different plants and methods of grafting, soil conditioning, and curing of diseased vines and trees.

The Arab contributions to food production are legion. They were able to graft a single vine so that it would bear grapes in different colors, and their vineyards were responsible for the future wine industries of Europe. Peach, apricot, and loquat trees were transplanted in southern Europe by Arab soldiers. The hardy olive was encouraged to grow in the sandy soil of Greece, Spain, and Sicily. From India they introduced the cultivation of sugar, and from Egypt they brought cotton to European markets. "May there always be coffee at your house," was their expression, wishing prosperity and the joy of hospitality for their friends. Coffee was *qahwah*, that which gives strength, and derivatives of that name are used today in almost every country of the world. They also perfected the storage of soft fruits to be eaten fresh throughout the year.

Arab horticulture gave the world the fragrant flowers and herbs from which perfumes were extracted. Their walled gardens were for the pleasure of the senses—a pine tree standing green and aromatic in the heart of a garden scented with jasmine; a fountain or artificial pool to delight the eye amidst lavender and laurel; a special rose garden blooming in riotous color, the roots injected with saffron to produce yellow, and indigo to produce blue; vines and trees injected with perfumes in the autumn flooding the air with fragrance in the spring; a weeping willow dipping gracefully into the middle of a clear lake; arbors and pergolas constructed where streams of water could bubble through them, cooling the air and giving relief from the heat of the desert. Mimosa and wild cherry lavished color against stone walls, and cypress grew tall, close and straight, bordering alleyways to obliterate from view all that was not pleasing.

Bulb flowers were already in a highly hybridized and cultivated state when the Crusaders carried them home from Palestine to western Europe toward the end of the centuries of Arab power. Rice, sesame, pepper, ginger, cloves, melons and shallots, as well as dates, figs, oranges, lemons, and other citrus fruits, were introduced into European cuisine via the Crusaders and the trade caravans of Eastern merchants.

The women of Europe borrowed from the cosmetics first prepared by the Egyptians, Syrians, and Phoenicians. Some of these included lipsticks, nail polishes, eye shadows, eye liners (*kohl*), perfumes and powders, hair dyes (*henna*), body lotions and oils, and even wigs. A symbol of the vanity of the medieval ladies of European courts was the high peaked, pointed cap with its trailing veil of silk. This fashion of Jerusalem was called the *tontour*, and noble ladies of both the East and Europe vied with each other on the height of the *tontour* and the elegance of the fabrics used in the design of the face framing millinery.

Much of our contemporary jewelry is a result of inspiration from adornments of the ancient and medieval Arabs, and the highly prized squash blossom design was once on the uniform button worn by Spanish conquistadors.

OTHER SCIENCES

Concerning Arab contributions to engineering, one can look to the water wheel, cisterns, irrigation, water wells at fixed levels, and the water clock. In 860, the three sons of Musa ibn Shakir published the *Book on Artifices* which described a hundred technical constructions. One of the earliest philosophers, al Kindi, wrote on specific weight, tides, light reflection and optics.

Al Haytham (known in Europe as Alhazen) wrote a book in the tenth century on optics, *Kitab al Manazir*. He explored optical illusions, the rainbow, and the camera obscura (which led to the beginning of photographic instruments). He also made discoveries in atmospheric refractions (mirages and comets, for example), studied the eclipse, and laid the foundation for the later development of the microscope and the telescope. Al Haytham did not limit himself to one branch of the sciences, but, like many of the Arab scientists and thinkers, explored and made contributions to the fields of physics, anatomy and mathematics.

CRAFTS

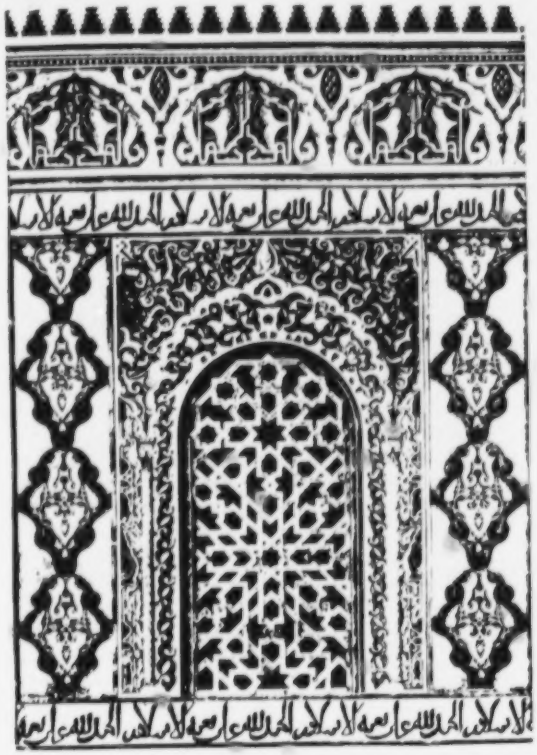
Because the ancient Arabs believed that the arts served God, they raised small scale artestries to new levels of perfection. Glassware, ceramics, and textile weaves attest to their imagination and special skills. They covered walls and objects with intricately detailed mosaics, tiles, carvings, and paintings. Syrian beakers and rock crystals were in great demand in Renaissance Europe, and the Azulejos, the irridescent lustre pottery from the Moorish kilns in Valencia, also enjoyed great popularity. New glazing techniques were developed, and the brilliant blues took on many names. (The Chinese called them Muhammedan blues, and Dutch traders called them Chinese blues.)

They were masters of silk weaving, and the Arab cape worn by Sicily's King Robert II on his coronation is one of the best examples of this delicate art. Cotton muslin, Damask linen and Shiraz wool became watchwords for quality in textiles in Europe.

One considers Moroccan leather to be of particularly fine quality. The Moroccan tanners of the Middle Ages developed methods for tanning hides almost to the softness of silk, and they used vegetable dyes that retained color indefinitely. These leathers were used for book bindings, and the gold tooling and colored panels of the Arab style are still being produced, particularly in Venice and Florence, to the present day.

The Arabs further developed the art of crucible steel forging. They hardened the steel, polished and decorated it with etchings, and produced tempered Damascene swords. Other works in metal included intricately cut brass chandeliers, ewers, salvers, jewel cases inlaid with gold and silver, and, of course, the beautifully decorated astrolabe.

LANGUAGE AND CALLIGRAPHY



Details of a window of the Alhambra, Granada.

Because God spoke to Muhammed in Arabic, Muslims venerated the Arabic language. Thus, to Muslims, Arabic calligraphy itself became an art form. It was the chief form of embellishment on all the mosques of the Arab world, and the religious and public buildings of Palermo, Cordoba, Lisbon and Malaga are resplendent with it.

The Arabic language is rich and pliant, and poetry, literature, and drama have left their mark on both East and West. Among the earliest publications of the Arabs were the translations into Arabic of the Greek and Roman classics—the works of Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, Ptolemy, Dioscorides and Galen. Some note that the poet Nizami's translations of the twelfth century romance, *Layla and Majnun*, may have been an inspiration for the later work, *Romeo and Juliet*. Ibn Tufail's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (Alive, Son of Awake), considered by many to be the first real novel, was translated by Pocock into Latin in 1671 and by Simon Ockley into English in 1708. It bears many similarities to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. *A Thousand and One Nights* and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* are among the best loved and most widely read of Arab literature. The fascination with Arabic, following the Hellenistic period of Louis XIV, is particularly evident in Shakespeare's characterizations of the Moors (Othello and the Prince of Morocco), in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, and in George Peel's *The Battle of Alcazar*.

Besides influencing *belles lettres*, the Arabs developed a system of historiography called *isnad*. This procedure documents all reliable sources and it provides the modern historian with accurate and comprehensive materials. Foremost among these historiographers was Ibn Khaldun, of whose *Book of Examples* Arnold Toynbee writes: "Ibn Khaldun has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time."

A Selection of English Words From Arabic

admiral	check	mohair
alchemy	check-mate	muslin
alcohol	chiffon	racquet
alcove	cipher	ream
alfalfa	coffee	saffron
algebra	cotton	sash
alkali	crimson	satin
almanac	damask	sherbet
amber	elixir	sofa
arsenal	gazelle	sugar
average	gauze	sumac
azure	hazard	syrup
boraz	jar	tambourine
calendar	julep	tariff
caliber	magazine	traffic
candy	marzipan	zenith
caraway	mattress	zero

MUSIC

The harp, lyre, zither, drum, tambourine, flute, oboe, and reed instruments are today either exactly as they were used from earliest Arab civilization, or variations of the Arabs' early musical instruments. The guitar and mandolin are sisters to that plaintive, pear-shaped stringed instrument, the *oud*.

The bagpipe was first introduced into Europe by Crusaders returning from the wars in Palestine. It quickly became identified with the British Isles. Once the entertainment of the lonely Arab shepherd, the bagpipe returned to Palestine with the British Army. This lost musical art was relearned during the period of Sir John Glubb's reorganization and command of Jordan's colorful Bedouin Corps.

Arab poetry was put to music in the subtle delicacy of minor key sequences and rhythm. The modes continue to influence our ballads and folk songs today. Extempore poetry was perfected into musical expression, and Arab wedding and other occasions are still celebrated with extempore versing and musical composition.

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PHILOSOPHY

Arab philosophers effectively integrated faith and scientific fact, letting one exist within the framework of the other. The Arab philosophers after Byzantium re-discovered the classic philosophy of Aristotle, Plotinus, and Plato in attempting to find answers to the fundamental questions concerning God's creation of the universe, the nature and destiny of the human soul, and the true existence of the seen as the unseen.

Among the well known philosophers of the medieval world were al-Kindi, who contributed to the work of Plato and Aristotle; al-Farabi, who made a model of Man's community; Avicenna (Ibn Sina), who developed theories on form and matter that were incorporated into medieval Christian Scholasticism; Ibn Khaldun, who expounded the cycles of a state in his *Muqqadimah* (Introduction).

Averroes (Ibn Rushd), who sought the meaning of existence, provided Europe with its greatest understanding of Aristotle, and who, more than any other Arab philosopher, influenced European philosophy. He was called the "soul and intelligence of Aristotle" by Ibn Maymun, the great Arab-Jewish philosopher better known as Maimonides. Thomas Aquinas, leaning heavily on the philosophy of Averroes, became Christendom's leading expert on Arab doctrines.

In discussing contributions to human civilization of some of the medieval Arab scientists, artists, educators, philosophers, poets and musicians, one must remember that their thought was molded and shaped by many ancient cultures—Greek, Roman, Chinese, Indian, Byzantine, Canaanite and Egyptian, for example. Arab culture, from its ancient beginnings to the present, has given us three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In government and law, one refers to Hammurabi (Babylonian), Ulpian and Papinian (Phoenicians). Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Arabs to human civilization has been the phonetic alphabet.

In all aspects of our daily lives, then—in our homes, offices and universities; in religion, philosophy, science and the arts—we are indebted to Arab creativity, insight, and scientific perseverance.

This brief survey of Arab contributions to human civilization was written by Mary Macron of Cleveland, Ohio. Mary, one of our first members, was proud of her Arab heritage and she sought to share it with others. She passed away in 1981. Her death has been a great loss to the Arab-American community. We are grateful to Cleveland State University's Ethnic Heritage Studies Program for allowing us to reprint Mary's essay as a tribute to her. The selection was edited for publication by David Hamod.

In compiling "Arab Contributions to Human Civilization," Mary Macron relied extensively on Rom Landau's *The Arab Heritage of Western Civilization* (The League of Arab States, Arab Information Center, 747 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017). The prints featured in this *Issues* are taken from Landau's book.

For further reading on Arab contributions to civilization, ADC recommends *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance* (John Hayes, ed., New York University Press, 1975), *History of the Arabs* (Philip K. Hitti, St. Martin's Press, tenth edition 1970), and *The Legacy of Islam* (Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume, eds., Oxford University Press, 1968).

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City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____
Daytime Telephone: _____
Evening Telephone: _____

TYPE OF PAYMENT

☐ Check ☐ American Express
☐ Master Card ☐ Visa
Credit Card # _____
Expiration Date _____
Signature _____